

# 6

## COMMUNITIES UNDER SIEGE

THE MINERS' DEFEAT at Orgreave and their desertion by the TUC forced the strike increasingly onto the defensive. The Coal Board began aggressively to encourage scabbing. This led to police invasions of a succession of mining villages to get the scabs into work. The miners were forced to concentrate on picketing their own pits. The courts were now brought into play against the NUM.

The scale of the Tory offensive evoked a heroic response. Whole mining communities rose up in revolt with women often playing a leading role.

After Orgreave Thatcher and MacGregor believed they could not only break the strike through a massive surge 'back to work' but break Arthur Scargill too. They hoped to copy the success of the scabs' organisation in Nottinghamshire nationally, in order to lead men back to work and break the grip of the left on the national union.

After Orgreave, Ian MacGregor's first line of attack in June was to propose a Coal Board ballot of the miners. MacGregor and Thatcher believed the strike was being held together by a minority of 'hooligan pickets' at each pit who intimidated the majority who wanted to go to work.

But MacGregor's advisors agreed that it was better to *assert* that a majority would go back if it weren't for wholesale intimidation, than to put it to the test. The ballot was scrapped and replaced by the first of MacGregor's letters to each miner's home, backed up by weekend speeches from Thatcher and Energy Secretary Peter Walker. The impact was minimal. The Coal Board claimed 300 back in North Derbyshire and 30 back at Bilston Glen in Scotland. They were straws in the wind, but nothing more.



## Police invade the Yorkshire villages

As the government and Coal Board went onto the offensive, so too did the police. They slowly transferred their operations from Nottinghamshire to Yorkshire, and on 9 July the first pitched battles between police and Yorkshire mining communities occurred at Rossington, near Doncaster, and Fitzwilliam, near Pontefract.

At Rossington, pickets felled trees across the pit lane and stretched barbed wire round the pit yard when they heard that two scabs would be brought into the pit. Eventually, 250 police cleared the road and brought in colliery managers, members of an area manage-



**A dose of their own medicine: a picket turns a hose on police at Rossington**



ment team and, the pickets believe, two scabs.

Word that scabs were back at the pit spread quickly and by midday a large crowd had gathered. They re-occupied the pit yard, held the management hostage, destroyed the colliery's personal records (to make it harder for management to victimise individuals for absenteeism or other disciplinary charges) and rebuilt the barricades.

The police, outnumbered and unsure what to do, agreed with Rossington branch officials to call in the Yorkshire Area miners' leaders to disperse the crowd. Jack Taylor, Sammy Thompson, Owen Briscoe and Frank Cave all appeared, calling for calm and for the pickets to go home. 'We must be organised and disciplined,' they





said. 'We are the generals. If you don't take our leadership the fight will be lost. What you are doing is illegal. You'll be charged with unlawful assembly and riotous behaviour.' But no one paid any attention.

At tea-time the crowd began to disperse, but quickly returned as police reinforcements arrived in the village. Again, the police asked Jack Taylor and the Rossington branch officials if they could bring out the management 'hostages'. Jack Taylor eagerly agreed, and even told a radio interviewer: 'I'll walk with them. I'll drive the vans. I'll do anything to get them out except carry them on my back!' But the pickets weren't interested.

After much argument, the Rossington officials led two police vans through into the pit yard to transport the management to safety. The police were in such a panic that they left without the assistant colliery manager, who'd become entangled on barbed wire. He was eventually rescued an hour later. As the police drove down the pit lane, pickets bombarded their vans with bricks.

The press of course described the events in Rossington as a riot. But it was, in reality, the whole community coming out to defend their pit and their strike from a few individuals who were threatening to destroy their months of sacrifice. One miner explained why the community reacted so strongly: 'Doncaster is a militant area. The Coal Board is desperate to get a scab back here. It would be a very dangerous situation if you got a pit scabbing. That's why we've got to stop them.'

The community beat the police in Rossington but in Fitzwilliam that night, things were different. The police weren't surprised by the overwhelming response of the local community, but the other way round.

A night of fighting began when police, without a warrant, went to the home of Brendan Conway and tried to arrest him for 'vandalism'. The local community believe the police's real reason was that the Conways were active in the local Labour Party Young Socialists branch. Mick Conway, Brendan's brother, described what happened:

Brendan wouldn't let them in without a warrant, so they left to get one. Within half an hour about 200 people, miners, non-miners, women and children blocked the street off so the police couldn't get in. After waiting for an hour the crowd moved to Hemsworth police station to protest.

Frank Clark of the Yorkshire NUM went in and was given





**Rossington: The colliery manager leaves the pit**

an assurance by Inspector Rufton that there would be no further harassment. He told the crowd that he had negotiated an agreement and that Brendan could go with a solicitor to the police station. Frank said it was a good deal and that everyone should go home. But afterwards the police started driving up and down the street shouting: 'Brendan we're coming for you — we're going to get you.'

Mick and Brendan went to the nearby Fitzwilliam Hotel. Just before closing time, squads of West Yorkshire police descended on the pub.

In the trial that followed the Fitzwilliam events, Lord Gifford, who defended those arrested, described what happened next:

It is undisputable that 50 police officers charged into the area, on the double, with no warning, synchronised, in a pincer movement. They entered private property without the invitation or consent of the landlord. How could this be justified? The prosecution said it was reasonable action in view of a breach of the peace that occurred. In fact it was a police riot. A punitive expedition by a newly-arrived chief inspector determined to stamp his authority on the community.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, a battle developed outside the pub. 'Even people who would never have dreamt of having a go were fighting back because they were so terrified,' said Mick Conway. Peter Hurst,



who was savagely beaten, explained: 'We thought they were fetching the Notts laws up here. Everyone gathered round to make sure they couldn't do it.'

In the street fighting that followed, police handcuffed Brendan Conway and another prisoner back-to-back round a lamp post and used them as a shield against miners who'd been throwing stones.

The police attack on Fitzwilliam was a vicious attempt to cow the local mining community. The trial of the nine arrested that night was similar. The police carefully drew up the charges to avoid a jury trial. Peter Hurst was jailed for six months for breach of the peace and assault. Six others, mainly miners, received three- or four-month jail sentences suspended for two years. Two were acquitted. The usual sentences for such offences are a fine or a conditional discharge.

The police prosecuting counsel ensured the trial was political, asking all the defendants and witnesses: 'Are you a member of a political organisation? Are you a member of the NUM? Do you go picketing? Were you at Orgreave?' The police frankly admitted beating those they arrested but justified it saying they were under attack. Yet the police doctor had to treat six of the nine defendants — and only one policeman!

Three police officers claimed that one of the defendants, Peter Doody, had been lying on his back kicking and throwing stones, so they hit him seven times on the arms and chest with their truncheons. Yet the front of Peter's body was unmarked, while photographs showed 15 truncheon weals on his back! Peter also suffered a displaced fracture of the shoulder.

The battles of Rossington and Fitzwilliam were a foretaste of things to come when the 'back to work' drive got into full swing in the autumn. They showed how the mining communities could be mobilised, but they also showed how the Yorkshire NUM leaders preferred to calm the disturbances in the pit villages rather than use them as a catalyst for mass pickets and demonstrations where they could have a direct effect on the strike.

If the Yorkshire NUM had called for mining communities to take to the streets whenever such an incident occurred, the police could not have controlled the situation, but they were never put to that sort of test.

### **The offensive in the courts**

The increased police pressure in the mining villages was matched



by mounting legal pressure on the union. On Tuesday 10 July, Mr Justice Megarry declared that proposed changes to the miners' union rules, to allow the union to discipline scab officials, were illegal. The next day a miners' special delegate conference passed the rule changes anyway.

When Megarry repeated his ruling a week later, he didn't fine the NUM. The dockers had joined the miners on strike and the government feared that a heavy fine against the NUM at that point might have brought yet more workers out in support.

By the end of July the docks strike was over. At once the courts started getting heavy. On 30 July the South Wales NUM was fined £50,000 for contempt of court. Then its funds were seized. The case had been brought by two Gloucestershire haulage contractors who wanted the union to stop picketing their lorries carrying scab coal to the Llanwern steelworks.

Arthur Scargill answered the ruling: 'It has not penetrated the minds of this government or the judiciary that you cannot sequester an idea or imprison a belief. I call on the British trade union movement to now honour the undertakings made at the TUC Special Congress at Wembley in 1981 and give total physical support to the NUM.' Scargill was to repeat this with increasing urgency as the legal attacks on the NUM unfolded during the summer and autumn of 1984. The TUC remained deaf.

The Tories and the Coal Board were also trying to rally support. Ministers launched an unprecedented propaganda attack on the miners while the scabs, with help from businessmen and 'advice' from the Tories and the Coal Board, tried to build a national organisation to confront the NUM. On 20 July 30 scabs from around the country met in London to discuss how to create a back to work drive.

Shortly afterwards the mysterious 'Silver Birch' emerged. Apparently franchised by **The Mail on Sunday**, he travelled the striking coalfields rallying the scabs. Silver Birch was marketed by the press as an ordinary miner championing the cause of the 'silent majority'. In reality, Silver Birch — a blacksmith from Bevercoates colliery named Chris Butcher — made no secret of who provided the money for his campaign: 'It's from wealthy business people who want the strike to finish,' he said.<sup>2</sup>

Butcher constantly attacked picket line 'intimidation' and 'violence'. The Tories, Coal Board and the scab leaders knew it was the best issue on which to isolate the miners from the rest of the trade union movement. They also began to believe their own propaganda



about the strike being held together only by threats and thuggery.

**The Times** carried on 3 August a hysterical article headed 'Hit Scargill, help miners', by David Hart. It eulogised the scabs:

The Nottinghamshire men are fighting a battle not just for themselves, but for their country. They are in the front line and they are quite aware of it. 'Scargill is trying to destroy the democratic rights of working-class people,' said one Nottingham delegate. 'If we fail, the country will have to look out,' said another.

The grass roots no longer belongs to Scargill and his likes . . . The battle has been joined. If it is to be won speedily, all who love freedom and believe in democracy should do what they can to help the working miners financially or in any other way.

David Hart wasn't just an hysterical right-wing columnist. In 1983, **The Times** had described him as a 'special advisor to the Prime Minister', and during August 1984 he attended a series of meetings that were to lead to the establishment of the National Working Miners' Committee. One member of that committee who later resigned in disgust said Hart was 'the money-man'.<sup>3</sup>

Hart involved Tim Bell, a director of Saatchi and Saatchi, and another 'close advisor' to the prime minister. Bell designed one of the Working Miners Committee brochures while Hart arranged newspaper advertisements for them. As the miners' strike wore on the press openly described both men as MacGregor's closest advisors, but in August all this was secret.

Meanwhile Butcher had got in touch with Robert Taylor and Ken Foulstone from Manton colliery in Yorkshire, and declared that 80 per cent of Yorkshire miners wanted to go back to work.<sup>4</sup> In May Taylor and Foulstone had tried to get a return to work at Manton but were shouted down by 1,200 men in a union meeting.

Three months later they tried a different line of attack. Butcher had put them in touch with his lawyers in Newark. They now announced they were taking legal action against the Yorkshire NUM. It was the start of a legal process that would ultimately lead to the sequestration of the miners' funds. The **Financial Times** noted: 'Anti-strike miners' apparent switch of tactics to the courts comes as the National Coal Board efforts to stimulate a return to work appear once more to be failing.'<sup>5</sup>

The press focused on Taylor and Foulstone's demand for a



national ballot: their legal action sought to ban the taking or counting of any vote at an NUM conference. At Area level they sought to restrain Yorkshire NUM officials from telling members not to cross picket lines and their writ asked the court to order the Area executive not to implement any resolution of the Area council or to instruct or mandate any delegate to any conference until fresh elections had been called.

It was the most comprehensive legal attack on a trade union for decades, and Taylor and Foulstone's solicitors, the Newark firm of Hodgkinson and Tallents, set out to get maximum publicity for their clients. As Michael Crick wrote: 'It so happened that a partner in Hodgkinson and Tallents was Chairman of the Grantham Conservative Association, whose MP is Douglas Hogg, the husband of Sarah Hogg, Economics Editor of **The Times**.' Mrs Hogg kindly offered 'advice on how to handle the media coverage', supplying contacts such as the home telephone number of Sir Alastair Burnet, the ITN newsreader.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the **Financial Times** was reporting how businessmen had donated £30,000 to the scabs in three weeks. 'Sir Hector Laing, chairman of United Biscuits, is believed to be among the businessmen.'

Over the weekend of 10–11 August, the National Working Miners Committee held its first informal meetings. On Saturday nine scab miners met with David Hart at the Castle Donnington Guest House near the East Midlands airport. On Sunday they met again, this time at Longlands Farm, Knightwick, near Worcester, the constituency of Peter Walker. The farm was owned by Captain Edward Evans, a supporter of the right-wing christian organisation Moral Rearmament.

This time they were joined by Graham Turner, a **Sunday Telegraph** feature writer who that morning had an exclusive interview with Ian MacGregor printed on the paper's front page. MacGregor confidently predicted a mass return to work and declared: 'I think Arthur Scargill's biggest problem is going to be the centre of his battle-line in Yorkshire. That's the place which is going to crack the quickest.' He must have known exactly what Hart was up to.

### **The occupations begin**

A handful of scabs went into Yorkshire pits in the week beginning 20 August and provoked the second round of fighting in the pit villages. The first scab back at Silverwood in South Yorkshire brought



the biggest turnout at a branch meeting since the start of the strike. They voted not to return to work until the scab was sacked, and the next day there was a pitched battle between police and pickets at the pit.

The first scabs went into Armthorpe near Doncaster on 21 August, surrounded by a massive police escort. The Armthorpe miners were the first to picket Nottinghamshire. Now three of them were breaking the strike. The village was stunned, not just by the scabs but by the Manchester police who accompanied them. The police seemed intent on provoking a battle. They amused themselves by taunting the pickets, waving wage packets and five-pound notes at them.

They got their battle the next morning when pickets occupied pit yards and built barricades at Bentley, Yorkshire Main and Armthorpe — all within a few miles of each other. The Bentley and Yorkshire Main incidents were quickly over but the battle of Armthorpe lasted all day.

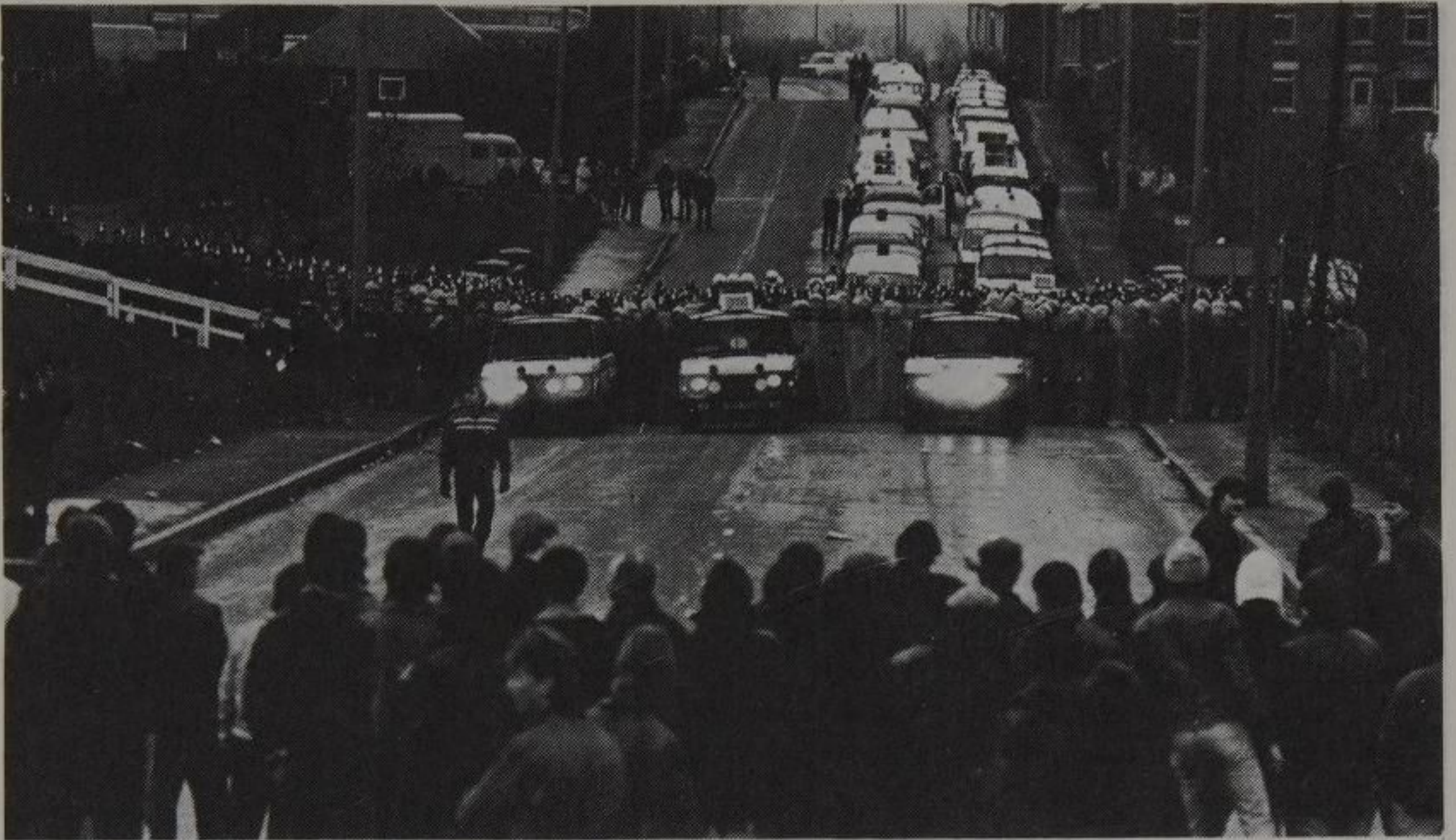
Early in the morning, hundreds of pickets barricaded the pit with a mobile crane and large concrete blocks to prevent the scabs getting in. The police kept out of the village until 8.30 a.m. when suddenly 50 transit vans roared up to the pit gate and discharged riot police who immediately set about the pickets. Hundreds more police fanned out in the woods round the Armthorpe pit to catch pickets running away. The whole operation looked cleverly planned and coldly executed.

The village was sealed off for the next 12 hours. For a while it was even impossible to phone in or out. The police ran riot. They chased pickets down streets, through gardens and into houses. One Armthorpe miner described the scene:

Everywhere round the pit, within half a mile of the pit, if the pigs chased you, people called 'come into our house'. Not just miners but ordinary working people. It totally changed the attitude of people who are not miners. That day there were six to seven hundred from Armthorpe outside their houses, at the end of their gardens, shouting 'Pigs', 'Bastards', 'Nazi storm-troopers'.

For the whole day, pickets hid under beds, in attics and even in coal bunkers to avoid the police. Even there they weren't safe as police came bursting into homes smashing windows, doors and furniture. The scenes could have come straight from Northern Ireland.





Police blockade outside Cortonwood colliery

The police claimed that the occupation of Armthorpe pit and the subsequent battles in the village were the work of 'sinister paramilitary' squads. In fact they were sparked by the determination of the police to get their scabs into work at all costs. And the determination of the community to resist.

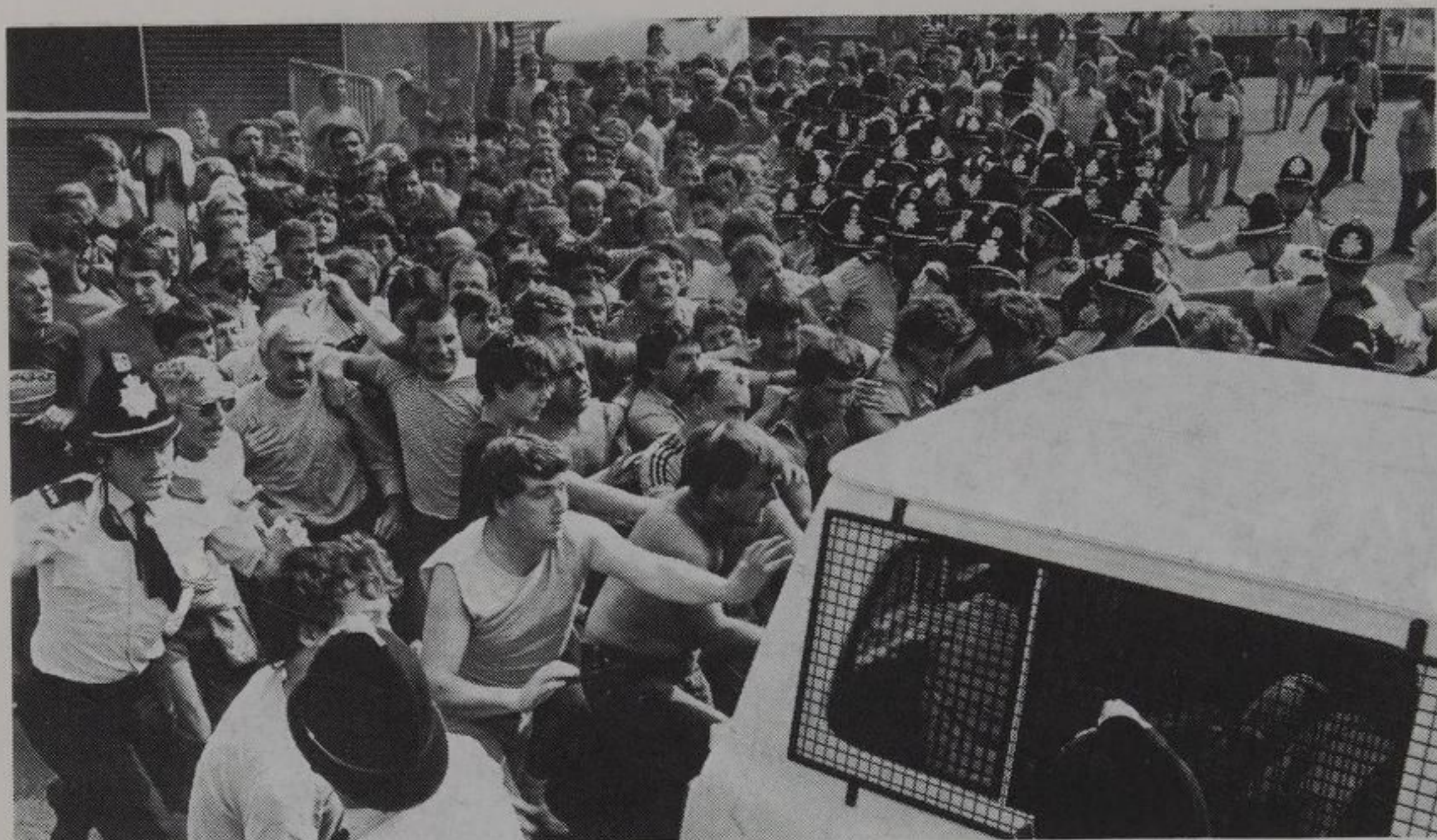
Two days later, Easington in County Durham got the same treatment. Like Armthorpe, Easington prided itself on being a militant pit, and like Armthorpe the Coal Board tried desperately to get someone back at work. They found their man in Paul Wilkinson, a miner who'd recently been transferred to the pit. For four days, the police tried to get Wilkinson to work, but gave up when confronted by 1,000 pickets.

Ben Hardy, the Easington lodge delegate, explained what happened next: 'The Tory MP for Newcastle Central, Piers Marchant, made a scathing attack on the Chief Constable of County Durham saying he didn't have the guts to get the man in. We knew there was something floating about on the Friday because we'd heard the previous day that there was police contingents coming up from Northampton, Cleveland and Sussex.'

Sure enough, the police got Wilkinson into the pit on Friday morning. They took him through a back entrance — breaking an agreement between the colliery manager and the NUM lodge.

The lodge officials tried to keep calm on the picket lines while





Pickets vent their anger as three scabs leave Allerton Bywater pit in West Yorkshire

they demanded that management send Wilkinson home. Ben Hardy continued: 'Then the police arrived in riot gear and they were deployed in the yard. We'd talked about an hour to no avail, so the lads took things into their own hands and had a rampage. It didn't last more than three or four minutes.' Cars were overturned, windows broken and fire extinguishers turned on police to drive them away from one miner they seemed intent on kicking to death.

Billy Stobbs, chairman of the Easington NUM and a member of the national executive, declared: 'I've lived in Easington all my life and never thought in my wildest dreams that I would see police baton-charging workers fighting for their jobs . . .'<sup>7</sup>

The fighting in the village was over quickly, but the police stayed for days. Riot police marched about the village, shields on their arms and batons drawn. Easington miners claim that up to 3,000 police occupied their village. 'For the first few days people couldn't go anywhere,' said Ben Hardy.

A rank-and-file miner continued: 'They stopped the service buses going in and out of the village and searched people.' Easington was cut off from the rest of Britain for days while the police occupied it like a conquering army.

Heather Woods, who helped run the Easington soup kitchens, described the impact the police made: 'My kids now call the police "pigs". I didn't teach them. They've seen what has happened and



they've learned it for themselves. I used to see it on the telly, kids in Northern Ireland treating police like this and thought the parents must be to blame. But now, you see you don't need to indoctrinate them. The police do it for them.'

The Coal Board expected every miner they got back to work would act like a magnet drawing others around them. But the arrival of the first scabs had precisely the opposite effect. It brought miners who'd done nothing throughout the strike rushing to the picket line. A single scab brought a whole community onto the streets.

In Scotland the Coal Board now claimed 100 men were working at Bilston Glen colliery. Yet a month before, they had claimed 120. The union estimated that only 37 NUM men were scabbing.

At Castlehill the Coal Board claimed two miners were back, but they turned out to be nurses sent back to work by the union! In Durham the Coal Board claimed a major breakthrough at Monkwearmouth colliery where 14 scabs crossed the picket lines. But they were all office workers or supervisors belonging to COSA, and as the scabs went into Wearmouth, 17 deputies who normally provided safety cover walked out.

On Fleet Street, only the **Financial Times** maintained a sense of perspective: 'Every area has at least one working miner — just' ran a headline, while underneath the text noted mournfully that the scabs who'd returned to work in Durham, South Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent represented just 0.15 per cent of the strikers!<sup>9</sup>

A meeting of Socialist Workers Party supporters in the NUM held in early September discussed how to deal with the new defensive stage of the strike. The suggestions were simple — contact every striker and try to get them involved.

A Silverwood miner explained how they had organised after the first scab went into their pit:

We went round knocking on people's doors trying to get them out picketing. The response was good, people would come out. They felt they had to fight. We began to suss out some of the problems. There are people who are basically scared, and for every miner who says he's scared there are ten that think it. We're scared, but we're used to it. Many sit at home watching police violence on TV and it terrifies them. We've got to understand that when we get people out picketing.

A miner from a Barnsley Area pit where there were no scabs tried to get a similar operation going with activists whose bail condi-



tions barred them from the picket line.

We pulled a few of the lads who'd been arrested together and we started going round knocking on doors and had some success in getting people out. Then we put resolutions to the branch. It said we should get a list of everyone's name and address who had been arrested and can't go out picketing and form them into recruiting teams. We should also get a list of everyone who's been passive then the recruiting teams could visit them.

But the branch committee refused to accept the resolution, then blocked the idea at the next branch meeting even though a majority there wanted to discuss it. It was, they said, 'an invasion of privacy'.

The importance of stopping the scabs before they emerged was emphasised by another Yorkshire miner:

Even in a pit where there are no scabs you can still go round talking to people because that way you are neutralising any potential scabs. The people who are stuck at home watching TV and reading their papers have their heads filled with all sorts of rubbish. When we go and start arguing with them we are putting them off any ideas of going back to work. You also start to hear about anyone who's weakening, who's thinking of going back to work, and you can start arguing with them before it reaches the stage where they will scab.

A miner from the Longannet complex in Scotland warned of another problem: 'The Scottish Area coordinating committee see leafletting as an end in itself, as part of a community campaign, rather than a way to step up mass picketing. We've got to be clear that mass picketing is the only way to win this strike,' he stressed.

His point was emphasised by a miner from the Lothian region who talked about the scabbing at Bilston Glen. 'In a week of mass pickets we got the number of scabs down from seventeen to five. But then the officials made a deal with the police that there would only be six pickets and six police on the gates.' Once the mass picket was lifted, more scabs were going in every day.

These ideas of how to consolidate the strike should have come from the area leaders of the NUM, but they didn't.

In Yorkshire, for example, the Area leaders offered no new tactics for the defensive period of the strike. Instead Jack Taylor repeatedly assured his members that if they stood firm, 'General Winter' would win the strike for them. Many miners accepted this





A miner is arrested at Easington after police invaded the village in the last weeks of the strike

recipe for passivity, particularly as the back-to-work movement seemed stalled and the TUC Congress promised massive support.

### **The police against the pit villages**

Any lingering doubts about the Tories' intentions should have been swept away when on 11 September Home Secretary Leon Brittan made his infamous 'jackboot pickets' speech. Brittan told a delighted audience at a Tory rally in Worksop:

Those tempted to try their hand at violence and crime in future might care to reflect that arson, assault causing grievous bodily harm and criminal damage with intent to endanger life are offences which carry life sentences as a maximum.

**The Economist** magazine explained that Brittan's speech wasn't simply playing to the gallery. 'The government's worst nightmare is that a tired Mr MacGregor might agree some compromise dreamed up by his industrial relations staff. Mr Leon Brittan did his best to avert a settlement.'

Anyone who had had any contact with the policing of the strike knew only too well that the 'jackboots' were worn by the police — so too were the helmets, gauntlets, shields and other riot gear. Brittan's





**Ian Wright of Hammersmith miners' support group after the police charge at Maltby**

speech was also a signal to the courts and police to intensify their attacks on the miners and the mining communities.

Throughout the strike the courts were one of the Tories' major weapons. By 4 September nearly 6,500 miners had been arrested, most



on relatively minor charges such as breach of the peace or obstruction. But more than 400 faced charges which carried possible life sentences.

The rising tide of arrests and police violence was designed to remove militants from the picket line and frighten off miners who were tempted to join pickets for the first time. In the face of this, the South Yorkshire Council police committee tried to restore some control over the local police. They threatened to cut the mounted police and dog units, using the excuse that they could not afford to keep them because of the cost of policing the strike.

The next morning the police horses were unleashed for the first time since Orgreave on a mass picket at Kiveton Park. Their use was unnecessary but was milked by the police for all the publicity they could get. This was the first event in a fortnight of vicious police tactics and cynical news manipulation designed to shake off criticism while at the same time maintaining the image of wholesale 'intimidation' by the striking miners.

The Kiveton Park picket was followed by one at Maltby on Friday 21 September where the police claimed they were subjected to a four-hour barrage of bricks, bottles, air-gun pellets and catapult-launched ball bearings from 5,000 miners. 'It was orchestrated without a doubt,' claimed Superintendent Eric Vallance. 'It was a very well planned picket and escalated at an alarming rate.'<sup>10</sup>

In fact, 2,000 pickets faced police with horses and dogs from the South and West Yorkshire constabularies. There were no air rifles on the picket line. The police did face sporadic brick throwing, but only after they had baton-charged the pickets.

The following Monday, there was another confrontation at Maltby where, the **Daily Express** claimed: 'Pickets opened fire with deadly new weapons', as '500 brave policemen faced 5,000 raging pickets.'<sup>11</sup> Ted Millward, the Maltby branch treasurer, told a different story of just 1,000 pickets confronted by a massive police presence. 'We couldn't get near the pit gate,' he said. 'They shoved us right away to the perimeter of the village . . . There was some stones thrown, but very little.'<sup>12</sup>

The police waited until most of the pickets had dispersed, then a squad of boiler-suited officers emerged from the woods to launch a savage attack on those remaining. 'I was involved at Orgreave but I've never seen anything like this. And a lot of the public who were on their way back to work saw it all,' Ted Millward explained.

Ian Wright, a member of the Hammersmith miners' support committee on a visit to South Yorkshire, was repeatedly truncheoned



about the head as he lay on the ground. As miners tried to comfort him, the police screamed: 'Let the bastard die.'<sup>13</sup>

Labour MP Kevin Baron was attacked as he walked to his car: 'The police were bludgeoning people to the ground. When I went back later there was still a pool of blood on the pavement. I have never seen anything so brutal in my life.'<sup>14</sup>

Bob Mounsey, a 50-year-old miner who used to be the Maltby NUM branch delegate, was also a victim. He described his experiences:

I'd just walked back to the Maltby bus stop to let my wife know I was OK. She'd seen the aggro earlier. As I walked back past the Lumbley Arms, about 35 to 40 police came out behind me.

I dodged two, one who struck at my head with his yardstick and another who tried to knee me between the legs. Then I was hit on the hip. It paralysed my leg. As I stumbled another hit me on the leg and head. A group of them kicked me on the floor.

I wasn't knocked out. I just lay there dazed. An old chap came across to see if I was OK. I tried to get up but he told me to stay down because the police were still hanging about. The police had no intention of arresting anyone. It was just a commando raid to dish out some hammer.

Bob's injuries included bruises across his kidneys, down his left leg from the hip to the knee, on both shoulders and he had a lump on the back of his head.<sup>15</sup>

Maltby NUM officials knew exactly why the police had been so savage. 'They have adopted the tactic of terrifying or injuring our lads,' said Ted Millward, while Ron Buck, the Maltby branch secretary, explained why the size and behaviour of the pickets had been so distorted: 'It gives the police justification for their turnout and behaviour.'

The next day members of the South Yorkshire police committee met Home Secretary Leon Brittan. He offered to review the government's contribution to the policing costs in the self-proclaimed 'socialist republic'. With that the police committee reprieved the horses.

The police attacks on the mining communities increased during October. Perhaps the most notorious was at Grimethorpe where police with riot shields attacked men, women and children picking coal on the colliery tip. As word of the attacks got round the village, the miners replied by first picketing and then attacking lorries which had dispensations to take coal from the pit. For two days there was





Picking coal at South Kirkby

guerrilla warfare in Grimethorpe between miners determined to get revenge and the police who were equally determined to beat the community into submission.

The heat was eventually taken out of the confrontation when the South Yorkshire police committee called a public meeting where local residents could complain about the police.

'I've been assaulted, kicked, punched and handcuffed,' said Norman Whittaker, the town mayor. Miner's wife Elaine Crawford told the meeting: 'I was going home about 11.30, when a police van came screaming round the corner with no lights on. The bobbies pounced on a young boy and kicked hell out of him. We were shouting and screaming at them to stop. You know what they called me?' she asked. "Get home you prostitute, you whore."'

George Moores, the chairman of the police committee, was moved to liken some of the picket line police to 'Nazi stormtroopers'. At the end of the meeting, Frank Gutsell, the Assistant Chief Constable of South Yorkshire, got up and said: 'I apologise, apologise unreservedly' for some of the police behaviour.

It was a unique statement by a senior policeman during the miners' strike and it was widely reported. But the stories told by the people of Grimethorpe were quickly forgotten by Fleet Street.



## Women — the backbone of the strike

'If someone had said to me before this began that I'd be picketing, organising and addressing meetings, I'd never have believed them.' Those words came from the lips of thousands of women from the mining communities during the 12-month strike.

From the very start of the strike the women of the mining communities have refused to play the role that the press usually ascribes to the wives and girlfriends of strikers. As usual, the press attempted to play on the minds of striking miners by using women to undermine the dispute. They either presented women as the victims of the irresponsible action of the NUM, or in Nottinghamshire, as strident campaigners against the strike.

In direct answer to the press and TV, women's action groups sprang up in many pit villages in the first few weeks of the strike. They quickly got involved in all aspects of the strike, until they became the driving force behind much of the organisation which held the strike together on a day-to-day basis.

First and foremost, these groups generally set up and maintained the food kitchens which were as much a feature of the strike as the picketing. Often the Women's Action groups were set up independently of the union, but the union could not have survived without them. Isabell, who helped start the women's action group for the wives and girlfriends of miners at Yorkshire Main colliery near Doncaster, explained how they began:

It started because I couldn't stand the TV making out that the wives weren't behind their men. I was so angry and frustrated for a week that in the end Brian [Isabell's husband] took me round the wives of some other militants in the pit. Ten of us sat up half the night talking about what to do and five of us decided to go and picket Thorseby in Nottinghamshire that night. Brian made *my* snap for a change! And he made us a banner. We called ourselves an action group because everyone says they support the miners but we want to be active.

As we walked up to Thorseby the pickets were moaning: 'Oh god not the women again'. They'd had the local wives nagging them, but when they found out we were from Yorkshire this fantastic cheer went up. It was brilliant. I knew we'd done the right thing. Men from Kent and South Wales were there. They'd been sleeping in Nottingham [Sherwood] forest to keep





Preparing Christmas dinner at Cadeby miners' kitchen

away from the police. They were bedraggled and hungry.

One young lad from South Wales — he can't have been more than 18 — he had been sleeping rough. He came up and the way he said: 'Have you got a cup of tea for me please?', it just filled me up. I just thought if he had that much faith in what he was doing to go through that, I'd got to do something too.

Involvement in the strike produced commitment to it. At Yorkshire Main, Isabell and her friend set out to organise the other women in the community. Their first efforts were both painstakingly slow, and a sign of the determination that made the women so crucial to the strike. 'We all sat down and wrote out leaflets by hand and distributed them through the doors. We made some posters too. We didn't get a great response, but 15 women came to a meeting and we decided to set up the kitchen.'

They were convinced from the start that they were in for a long bitter strike: 'Some said they'd raise money, some said they'd speak at meetings to raise money and some just said they'd cook the meals but nearly all of us want to keep up the picketing too,' said Isabell. Then the hard work of finding premises, scrounging equipment and raising the necessary funds began. The same scene was unfolding in all the coalfields.



Sometimes, the women's determination to hang onto their independent organisation and be more than cooks for the pickets led to confrontations with NUM officials over picketing and the running of the kitchens. Lorraine Bowler of the Barnsley Women's Action Group summed it up when she spoke after a women's march through Barnsley in support of the miners: 'At the beginning of the strike women in the Barnsley group wanted to go picketing and we were told that it was a bad enough job organising the men.' But, said Lorraine, the women don't need organising. They can do it themselves.

Indeed, the kitchens often became centres of strike organisation. Bentley Women's Action Group ran one of the most successful kitchens. They were twinned with Camden council workers in London and the regular donations sent to Bentley allowed them to feed 500 miners and their families every day. With less than half the active pickets attending union meetings, the kitchen became an important place for the pickets to meet and discuss. As one striker said: 'Coming here you learn more about the strike than you do at most union meetings. This is the place we get most of our information about what's going on.'

The kitchens increased in importance as a meeting place during the Coal Board's back-to-work campaigns. A miner from Westoe explained how the kitchen stopped men drifting back to work. 'We used to go down to the kitchen when the weekly food parcels were being given out. There were new faces for the meals and the parcels and we used to talk to them and get them more involved in the strike and the picketing. We would also use the opportunity to sort out hardship problems. One time a bloke was going back to work because his electricity was going to be cut off and he had a young kid. We found out about it, sorted it out and he stayed on strike.'

The best organised women's support groups did more than simply feed the communities and go picketing. A member of the Pontefract Women's support group explained:

We realised that a support group meant supporting the miners in every aspect. The first thing that came up was the electricity and gas putting pressure on people. The NUM weren't taking it far enough. They just gave out a letter to people threatened with disconnection which asked the gas and electricity board workers not to do it.

The women's support group told the gas and electricity boards, and the unions, that they'd form a picket line round any





A women's action group picket at Yorkshire Main — after the Area agreed to limit pickets to six

house threatened with disconnection. The electricity board back off when they see the support group because we're an organised body.

The women's support groups round the Pontefract area campaigned to force the local authority to increase the clothing grant to striking miners' children. Under-fives were getting nothing and school age children just £25 paid in quarterly instalments.

As the government's determination to starve the miners into submission became obvious, the sheer size of the organisation needed to maintain the mining communities grew enormously. The women's action groups rose to the task. At Maerdy in South Wales, for example, the women's support group committee met every week to arrange the distribution of food parcels. At a single meeting in early October they also planned how to approach shop stewards in sweet and toy factories for Xmas, planned a bonfire party, a jumble sale, a sponsored marathon, and the next week's fund raising.

Like many women's support groups, for many months they raised much of the money they needed by collecting in their own communities. But Jean Bromage explained, 'Our community has



been run down so much, everyone is in the same boat — you can only take off your own for so long.’ So they were forced to take part in the delegation work done in every major city and town in Britain. Many trade unionists found that women put the miners’ case better than their men.

One London fireman told how ‘it was the way the women explained what it meant for their families if the pits shut down that really got to people. By the time the delegation of women left one London fire station we had filled a van with food and toys we had collected.’

The effect on the women of the mining communities was electric. Jean Bromage explained: ‘We send women to Oxford and Birmingham where our lads are picketing and we do the meetings. The first meeting I ever did was in a college in Oxford. I’d never spoken in my life — I was shaking like a leaf. I still get the shakes but I do it. Thatcher has had the shock of her life during this strike. She never thought women could react like this. Before the strike I knew nothing about unions. I didn’t want to know.’

The Bold miners’ wives support group in Lancashire prepared themselves a little better. Lorraine Johnson, secretary of the group, had experience of public speaking — she’d called the numbers at the Old Folk’s Bingo in the miners’ welfare before the strike! She was quickly addressing mass meetings and organising a training scheme for other women to build up their confidence.

In many ways, the women’s action groups, the food kitchens, the delegations and fund-raising trips, the logging teams who got wood to keep the striking communities warm, the struggle to keep the strike alive during the autumn and winter of 1984 were the most inspiring parts of the strike. They showed the depths of skill, talent, humour, guts and sheer organising ability that had lain untapped in the mining communities. They also hinted at what might have happened in the strike if these qualities had been channelled by the union from the start.

The organisation and participation of women in the miners’ strike was unique in recent British history. Without it, the miners would have been beaten long before the eventual return to work.

Of course, women workers have always taken part in industrial battles. The Barking hospital strikers began their strike alongside the miners in March 1984 and were still out when the miners went back to work, while the past ten years have seen a string of major women’s strikes from the Fords sewing machinists, Trico, Grunwick, through



to Chix and Lee Jeans. What makes the women's involvement in the miners' strike unique is both its sheer scale, and that it involved women outside the workforce in a prolonged war of attrition.

The involvement of women in the Great Miners' Strike has broken down the idea that only those whose jobs are threatened can fight a strike. The women of the mining communities have proved that working-class women are as capable of fighting and leading a strike as their men. And in so doing, they have transformed their lives and their expectations. Things have changed on the union side too: there will be no pictures of semi-nude women in the **Yorkshire Miner** again, or in other miners' publications, as was the policy a few years before the strike. The relations between women and men have been radically improved.

As Anne O'Donnel, from Bentley, said: 'There's no way I would return to the kitchen sink now. I'm not going back to how things were before. Both me and my husband were fairly unpolitical before the strike but now we've both changed!'

### **Back to the courts**

At the end of September, Mr Justice Nichols ruled in the High Court that the strikes in the Yorkshire and North Derbyshire Areas were unlawful. 'The NUM's action will not be lawful unless and until it does hold a national ballot which shows a majority in favour of the strike action,' he declared.

Robert Taylor and Ken Foulstone, the Manton scabs who brought the case against the Yorkshire Area, were granted injunctions preventing the Yorkshire Area from calling the strike or pickets 'official' or disciplining scabs. Arthur Scargill replied on television:

I am going to say this, and quite clearly: that any miner in this union and any official in this union who urges or crosses a picket line in defiance of our union's instructions runs the risk of being disciplined under our rules. And there is no high court judge going to take away the democratic right to deal with internal affairs. We are an independent democratic union.

David Potts, the Manton branch secretary, was particularly upset. 'They talk about democracy. They're only interested as long as it goes their way,' he said. The Manton branch met a few days before the injunction was granted and 750 miners had voted overwhelmingly to continue the strike and condemn the legal action against the union.



Despite their High Court triumph, Taylor and Foulstone could find only two other Manton men to cross the picket line with them. In the rest of Yorkshire, only one other 'new face' turned up for work.

The High Court gave Arthur Scargill five days to 'consider' his contempt. Scargill repeated: 'If the choice is to spend a term in Pentonville or any other prison or to live by the imprisonment of my mind for betraying my class, the choice is that I stand by my class and my union!'<sup>16</sup>

On Wednesday 10 October Scargill was fined £1,000 and the NUM £200,000.

Even the **Daily Mirror** called for the fine to be paid. 'Mr Arthur Scargill and the miners' executive have broken the law and must face the consequences. It is not a Tory law. It is an English law. It does not mean submitting to a Tory government but to parliamentary government.'<sup>17</sup>

This 'law' was in fact a legal action paid for by businessmen, brought by two men who professed to represent the silent minority of the NUM, but could only get two others at their own pit to join them in crossing the picket line.

This wasn't the end of the legal onslaught. Taylor and Foulstone's lawyers served yet more legal orders on the miners' leaders. This time they sought to make all the members of the NUM executive, and the coordinating committee that ran the strike, personally liable for contempt if the court order was broken again.

Thirteen days later the NUM's assets were seized. And on 1 November, the two men's lawyers announced that they were beginning legal action to make each of the 25 members of the NUM executive personally liable to pay the full £200,000 fine. More legal actions followed. They became a constant threat to the NUM leaders and a constant distraction from the fight to maintain the strike and prevent the drift back to work.

### **Government on the offensive**

The miners' union, shorn of its funds, now faced a mounting attack from the government. Energy Secretary Peter Walker told the House of Commons on Monday 29 October that the government would give no more ground. The agreement between the Coal Board and the deputies union NACODS was their final offer.

The TUC tried desperately to get the NACODS deal accepted by the NUM, but the miners' negotiating team of Scargill, Heathfield



and McGahey wouldn't budge. However, the right wing on the miners' executive were interested. They showed their hand for the first time since April, demanded a national ballot on the NACODS terms, and were defeated by only 11 votes to 9.

Scargill called a national delegate conference to counteract the pressure he faced from the executive and he called on the TUC and Labour Party to deliver the 'total support' they had promised.

We believe the time has come to involve as much as possible in a public way, the wider trade union and Labour movement in a dispute which the Tories see clearly as the fight on the part of the establishment against an individual union. We are asking the trade union movement to respond accordingly and give the same sort of support to the NUM.

The NUM also called a series of rallies for the strikers and, as a symbol of the support they had earlier pledged, asked TUC leaders and Neil Kinnock to take part. But the more the miners needed help, the more they were spurned by those they asked. Neil Kinnock refused to attend, claiming his diary was 'too full'. Willis did speak, and used the platform to denounce the miners' pickets.

Now the Coal Board announced a £650 bonus — or bribe — for men returning to work. The campaign to break the strike had begun in earnest and it was prosecuted most ruthlessly in North Derbyshire.

### **Focus on North Derbyshire**

The **Financial Times** described the Coal Board's operation:

From the start of the strike, the management has armed itself with names, addresses and telephone numbers of workers and plotted their residence and likely attitude on large maps. The plan, which is being copied in Yorkshire and Durham, was to concentrate on workers living outside the immediate areas of the pit villages. The management also drew up lists of men believed to be strongly hostile to the strike, or even those who had worked a lot of overtime and might therefore be finding things particularly difficult. The management began telephoning and visiting those likely to return.

The scabs of the 'Working Miners Committee' rushed to the management's aid. At Shirebrook, Roland Taylor explained: 'I've thought things through with management at my own pit. They



suggested we use the phones to call people up — they gave us lists and lent us vans. Shirebrook has been a well oiled machine.’<sup>18</sup>

While the Coal Board were giving the scabs money to harass strikers and their families at home, Taylor’s colleagues on the Working Miners Committee were securing injunctions preventing the miners’ union spending money to hold the strike together!

The North Derbyshire officials, meanwhile, were complacent, claiming that the strike in the Area was ‘90 per cent solid’. Area president Gordon Butler said that in the face of the Coal Board offensive ‘to change tactics would be seen . . . as the act of desperate people.’

But the back-to-work pressure began to have an effect on miners in North Derbyshire, many of whom had not been drawn into activity in the nine months of the strike so far. Within a week a series of mass meetings were called in miners’ welfares.

Peter Elliot, branch secretary at Warsop and an area executive member, spoke to 300 miners at North Wingfield. He described how some North Derbyshire miners had rejoined the strike after going into work to be told by the colliery manager ‘I’m the union now’ and ordered to sign a promise not to strike again. He pulled no punches: ‘The Coal Board are out to destroy the union,’ he said. ‘Imagine life in the pit without it.’ And this was the argument that won the previously-divided audience.

The next day local MP Dennis Skinner needed all his oratorical powers to carry a meeting in Plessley miners’ welfare where hundreds of men had expected a vote to go back.

At both meetings, the questions from the floor hammered home the failure of the movement to back the miners. ‘Where’s the TUC?’ ‘What’s Kinnock playing at?’ ‘How the hell do we get the money to carry on?’

The union carried the day but it had been left desperately late: ‘We failed to keep the membership in touch,’ admitted Alan Gascoyne, the Shirebrook branch secretary. ‘We dished out **The Miner** and leaflets but it wasn’t enough. We never got down to the nitty gritty, going into the welfares and telling people the facts, what’s really going on.’

There was one other crucial weakness in North Derbyshire. The level of welfare facilities for the strikers was woefully inadequate, far worse than was available in most Yorkshire pit villages. Few North Derbyshire pits had kitchens for the strikers and their families. Instead the women’s support groups struggled to make up food parcels — the contents generally inadequate to feed a family for a day.



Few pits were 'twinned' with trade union branches or miners support groups in the major cities, instead funds were raised and food distributed centrally from Chesterfield.

But this only provided a pit such as Shirebrook with 90 food parcels a week when they needed 600! In such areas it was real tribute to the miners that so many took the meagre food parcel and not the Coal Board bribe.

The 'carrot', the chance of a wage packet, was backed up by force. In the early months of the strike pit villages like Shirebrook were subject to Nottinghamshire-style policing when the Coal Board expected the strike to crumble.

As the scabbing at Shirebrook increased in October and November, the police came back, in force. They swamped the village first at shift changing times, then constantly. Arrests on the picket line soared as the police tried to break the spirit of the militants.

The police had another string to their bow too. The back to work movement picked up steam as many of the North Derbyshire miners who had been arrested early on in the strike were appearing in court. They often found the police adding extra charges while the stipendiary magistrates — who are paid full-timers rather than the usual part-time local dignitaries — handed down savage sentences.

A higher proportion of Derbyshire miners were jailed or sacked than in many other areas. Some were offered their jobs back — providing they crossed the picket lines. And after Christmas, in an even more disgusting bribe, men who had been sacked were told that sons or nephews who had been offered jobs with the Coal Board, but hadn't started because of the strike, would not be employed unless they returned to work themselves.

This was the systematic intimidation of strikers that was going on during the 'back-to-work' drive, the real intimidation in the mining villages that was never reported by the papers or TV. And it was enough to crack some, but not the majority of miners in North Derbyshire.

## **Back to confrontation**

If North Derbyshire got the worst of the Coal Board's back-to-work drive, other areas felt the pressure too — but still the Area leaders didn't spell out what needed to be done to defend the strike.

Instead they seemed transfixed by a series of blows that rained down on the union. The sequestrators traced £2.8 million of the



miners' funds to Ireland, and the High Court ordered the North Derbyshire NUM not to spend any money on the strike.

To make matters worse, the NUM became even more isolated in its defiance of the Tory anti-union laws when Austin Rover won an injunction against nine unions declaring a wages strike at their plants was illegal. One by one the unions withdrew official backing until the strike eventually collapsed.

In the first week of their back-to-work bribe in November, the Coal Board claimed 2,100 men back at work for the first time. As a percentage of those striking it was pitiful — 3.5 per cent of the Scottish miners, 0.4 per cent of the Yorkshire miners, 0.2 per cent of the Northumberland and Durham miners and 0.1 per cent in South Wales. But the increase in scabbing did have a real impact on the spirit of the strikers, their supporters and those other groups of workers who had taken solidarity action.

The numbers going back to work increased during the second week of the Coal Board offer and led to confrontations between pickets and police in South Yorkshire. Where serious fighting did take place, it was generally provoked by the police. Dinnington saw the heaviest fighting, and the description given by Ken Moulds, the branch delegate, differed markedly from that written by the Fleet Street journalists, who got no closer to the action than the police press conference.

'We set up a picket line about midnight. Soon after six vans of riot police arrived. They poured out with their shields and everything. People were getting hurt straight away.' Ken described how the pickets at first ran away but then counter-attacked when they saw the police were attacking one of their comrades sprawled on the ground.

From then on the police escalated it all the day, charging pickets, shouting out war cries, beating their shields. The pickets replied by throwing things and the police quite openly threw them back although they are protected by riot shields and our lads aren't. A lot of lads were hit like that.

Six of our lads needed hospital treatment, one was detained with head injuries, another was discharged but taken back. His skull was broken. They chased the pickets 600 yards from the pit. It was then that the pickets put a barricade across the road to stop themselves being driven back further.

After this the men had gone through a barrier, any police were fair game and some went to attack the police station. We've just got beyond the stage where you stand back and let the police



truncheon you.<sup>19</sup>

In the next month, this scene was repeated in scores of pit villages, where, as soon as the Coal Board got one scab at a pit the police would invade the community in a bid to establish control of the area. Local people then had the choice, either to allow a single scab with his massive police escort to go to work unchallenged, or to fight back.

TUC general secretary Norman Willis did manage to condemn 'scenes of unprovoked police aggression' when he spoke at a miners' rally in Aberavon on 13 November. But the miners bore the brunt of his notorious 'violence is not the way' speech and responded by dangling a noose in front of him to go with the placards that read 'Where's Ramsey McKinnock?'

'Any miner who resorts to violence damages the miners' case far more than they weaken their opponents' resolve,' Willis declared. 'Violence creates more violence,' he said — and he wasn't referring to how the violence of the police was forcing miners to retaliate. 'Such acts if they are done by miners are alien to our common trade union tradition, however, not just because they were counter-productive but because they are wrong.'

Having satisfied Fleet Street, Willis continued with some cringing apologetics for the TUC's failure to deliver the solidarity they had promised. 'The TUC is not an army and I am not a field marshal. When I see hardship, when I see sacrifice, I wish I could guarantee you all the support you need. But I don't kid trade unionists and I'll never mislead the miners.'

It was an extraordinary statement. In the two months since the TUC Congress pledged its total support to the miners, the TUC General Council had not issued one leaflet, printed one poster or even called a single rally or march in support of the miners.

Indeed, throughout November and December, the more the miners needed support, the more craven the TUC and Labour leaders became.

Neil Kinnock in inimitable style accused the miners' leaders of wanting a 'glorious defeat'; while on 15 November Roy Hattersley called on the NUM leaders to ballot their members on the strike. The GMBATU cut off its daily £1,000 payment to the NUM.

But on a trip to Russia towards the end of November, Neil Kinnock surpassed himself. Russian press reports of starving miners being beaten by the police were exaggerated, he said: 'I told them that while people were enduring very great hardship there was no hunger,



and that the reports of deprivation on that scale were somewhat misleading.’<sup>20</sup>

The July issue of the Coal Board paper **Coal News** had claimed 57,000 miners were working. The August edition put the figure at ‘more than 60,000’. Yet in the week beginning 12 November, the Coal Board estimated 53,000 at work.

Perhaps the most spectacular fiddle, though, came in **The Sun**. Early editions of the 20 November issue reported 47,631 miners at work but an infuriated editor changed this total to 62,631 in later editions, saying the true figure ‘would aid Scargill’!<sup>21</sup>

The drift back to work petered out at the end of November when the Coal Board’s Christmas bribe ended. The Coal Board were certainly more successful than they’d been in the summer, but they had hardly advanced at all in the core areas of the strike. The strikers included 98 per cent of Yorkshire miners, 99 per cent of South Wales miners, 90 per cent of North East miners, and 66 per cent of North Derbyshire miners.

They had won a majority back to work at only a handful of pits. These included Bersham in North Wales, Shirebrook in North Derbyshire, Whittle in Northumberland and Shireoaks in South Yorkshire. However, they had broken the taboo of scabbing at most pits in the core areas of the strike.

As individual scabs appeared at more and more pits, the miners’ leaders dropped mass picketing and ordered men to picket their own colliery. Very quickly, this led to the emergence of flying police instead of flying pickets. Squads of police would shift from pit to pit, sweeping pickets aside as they brought scabs into work and then moved on to the next pit. The frustration and resentment this caused led some pickets to believe that individual acts of violence could substitute for the mass picketing that was now being blocked. The media naturally picked on these acts to try to isolate the pickets.

These acts were an attempt to overcome the lack of clear leadership from their Area officials, and the way the police not only battered them on the picket lines but also comprehensively outmanoeuvred them to get the scabs into work. The most notorious incident came on Friday 30 November when David Wilkie, a taxi driver, was killed when two concrete posts smashed through his windscreen as he was taking a pair of scabs into Merthyr Vale colliery in Aberfan. He was the first person to die in the strike who was not on the side of the pickets — several NUM members had died before this.

The press were, naturally, hysterical. None bothered to find out

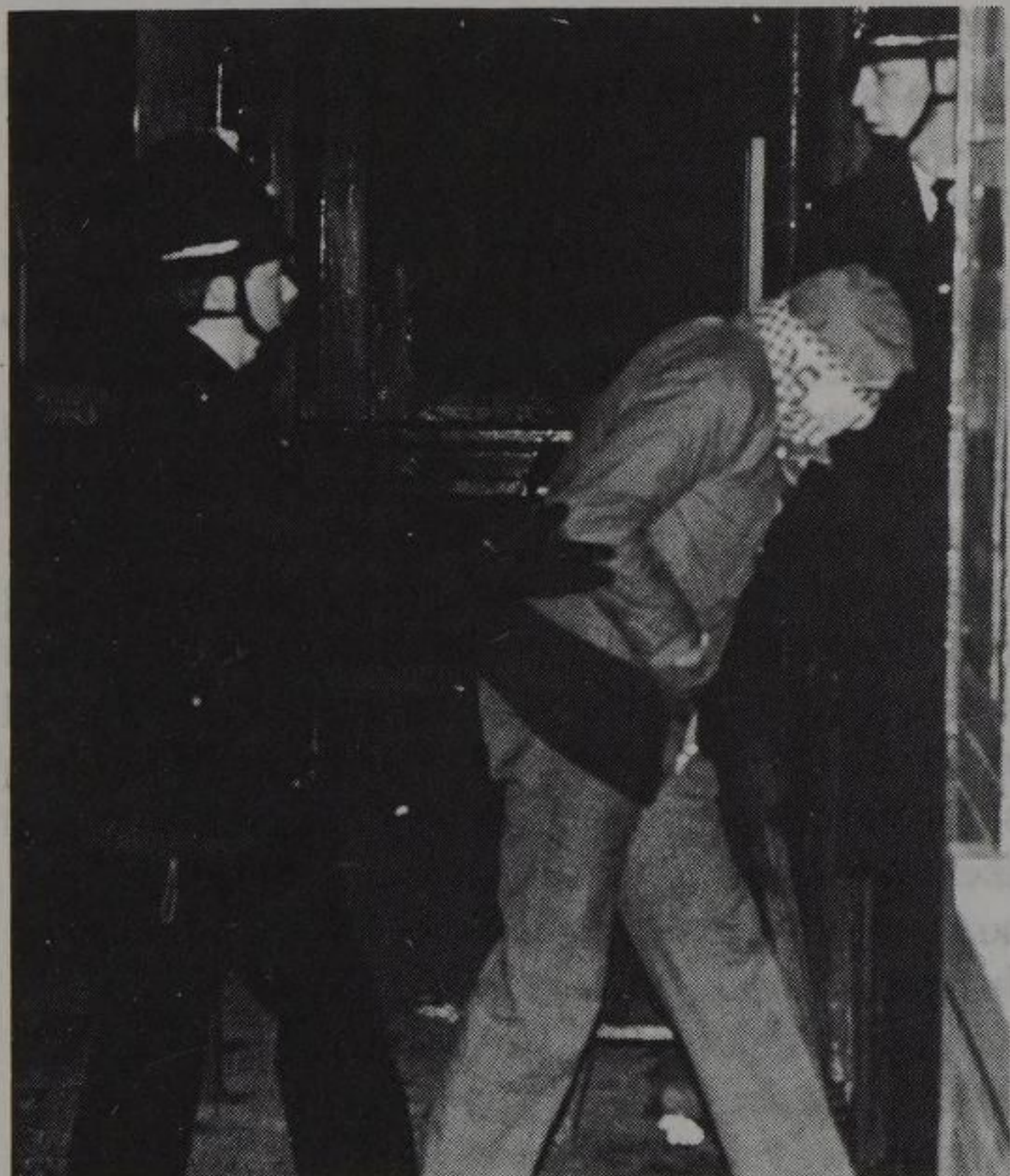


what had provoked the miners to the attack. If they had talked to local miners they would have found out how the police had swamped Merthyr Vale and Aberfan village to get the scabs into work.

Bill King, the branch secretary, explained how pickets were outnumbered three-to-one by police; how people were stopped going to work and even stopped from going to school so the scabs could get into work undisturbed. As in Yorkshire, a common complaint of the pickets was that police were waving £5 and £10 notes at them. Even the local vicar had been on the picket line and complained about the 'community being provoked by police methods'.

The police had only allowed one mass picket at Merthyr Vale, and that only consisted of a few hundred. It occurred earlier in the week in which David Wilkie was killed and during it, the scabs' taxi ran down three policemen!

After this incident, the police sealed off both ends of the valley leading to Merthyr Vale to keep pickets away. Men wanting to picket their own pit couldn't get through the roadblocks. The more determined found alternative routes. 'Boys were walking over the mountains to get to the picket. Sometimes they have to walk ten or fifteen



**The shame of a scab**



miles to picket their own pit,' explained a Merthyr Vale miner.

For a day or two, scrambling over the mountains in the pitch dark of the early morning was a challenge, but in the cold and rain of the November nights, a few miners decided there must be an easier and more effective way to scare the scabs than to struggle for hours to get to a picket line where you'd then be dwarfed by the giant police presence.

'It was the police who spread the pickets out, and that's why the incident happened — out of frustration,' explained another miner.

Of course the pickets were shocked by the killing of David Wilkie, but, as one miner said: 'They knew the risks — the driver was kitted up with a police riot helmet — and they were all well paid for it. The money they've spent on bringing these scabs into work could have opened up new reserves at this pit and secured all our jobs.'

Local anger was deep-rooted because, before the strike began, the union had repeatedly fought to save the jobs of the two Merthyr Vale scabs who were in the taxi. Union officials say they'd four times prevented the sacking of one and had to threaten a strike to save the job of the other, after he was given his cards for absenteeism!

Their determination to continue the strike was deeper-rooted still. It is eighteen years since 100 children and 40 adults died when the colliery spoil heap swept away houses and the school in Aberfan. A middle-aged miner summed up the way local people felt: 'They've taken away our children and now they're trying to take away our livelihood.'

The death of David Wilkie occurred on the day Neil Kinnock had finally arranged to speak at a miners' support rally. It gave him the perfect weapon to beat the NUM for the conduct of the strike.

The place he finally chose to 'put the case' was Stoke on Trent, in the heart of the Staffordshire coalfield where a majority of miners were working. There, Kinnock told the miners: 'The violence has got to stop and stop now. For, as the violence endangers others, so you deface this miners' cause and you disgust the trade union movement.'

Arthur Scargill, who sat stony-faced throughout Kinnock's performance, was also forced to condemn violence 'which occurred away from the picket line'.

There is a good argument against individual acts of violence and the 'hit squads' that sprang up in some mining communities, but it had nothing to do with the hypocrisy of Neil Kinnock and the TUC leaders. It is best illustrated by the events around Fryston colliery, where Michael Fletcher was attacked by striking miners after he



returned to work in November.

Fletcher's return to work brought with it the usual invasion by police, the usual baton-charge on the picket line, and the usual crop of injuries among the strikers. One man, 48-year-old Charles Maxwell, was detained in hospital for a week after the beating he received from the police.

If that weren't provocation enough, Fletcher lived opposite the food kitchen, and had been taking striker's food parcels until days before he returned to work. Furthermore, since he began working at Fryston in 1978, the Coal Board had tried to sack him three times — only for the union to save his job.

It was not surprising then that a group of frustrated strikers attacked Fletcher in his home a few days after he returned to work.

Of course the press seized on it. The scab became a star. TV cameras crowded round his hospital bed as Ian MacGregor rushed north to make a presentation to him. Just down the corridor lay Charles Maxwell. No one bothered to interview him. He'd only been hospitalised by the police.

Like the media and the Coal Board, the police seized their chance and began a wholesale round-up of militants at the pit. Fifty activists were arrested. The press and TV talked gravely of 'criminal conspiracies'. Roy Wright, the branch secretary, was charged with 'causing grievous bodily harm on the basis of inciting, aiding or abetting'. After four weeks remanded in Armley jail and another seven in exile, away from the mining areas, Roy's case finally came to court, and the police announced they had no evidence against him!

It was one of the starkest illustrations in the whole strike of how the police have used arrests, charges and bail conditions to neutralise the militants and demoralise the rest of the strikers.

The arrests in Fryston after the attack on Fletcher had just the purpose the police intended. They removed one of the best officials in the North Yorkshire area from the action and the best militants in the branch from the picket line. As a result the atmosphere on the Fryston picket line was more demoralised and depressed by the mass arrests than the return of the first scab to the pit.

This was a story repeated time and again in the core areas of the strike, of how the police would use an attack on a scab to round up young militants and try and force a confession from them. One North Yorkshire miner explained how militants began to fear the 'knock on the door' that was the first step to the police cells. He described how arrested miners were held for 72 hours without access to solicitors or



their families, and how the police tried to fit them up.

They told people that if they didn't plead guilty to something, they would be charged with smashing up the pit office. Anyone found guilty of that would automatically be sacked by the Coal Board. Once they agree to plead guilty, then they find they have bail conditions slapped on them which in a number of cases have amounted to house arrest.<sup>22</sup>

And this illustrates the real argument against 'hit squads' and attacks on individual scabs. It is nothing to do with upholding the rule of law, nor is it that violence is 'alien to the British trade union movement' as Kinnock said.

After a year on strike, after 10,000 often arbitrary arrests, after the ludicrous charges and bail conditions imposed on miners, after the lives lost on the picket line, after the thousands of terrible injuries inflicted by the police and their invasion of the mining villages, after a year of privation and media abuse, the miners had every right to take any action they saw fit to defend their strike.

The only argument against attacks on individual scabs was that they were not a way to win the strike. They were not a substitute for mass picketing involving whole communities, which characterised the beginning of the back to work movement. And they weren't a substitute for real solidarity, which the trade union leaders who eagerly denounced the miners' violence promised but never delivered.

### **'I am the NUM'**

The final assault on the NUM in 1984 came when the courts handed the union over, lock, stock and barrel, to a Tory lawyer.

The High Court replaced the elected officials of the miners' union with a 'Receiver' on 31 November. This followed contempt proceedings against the union (for not paying its £200,000 fine) brought by sixteen of the scabs so carefully cultivated by MacGregor and Thatcher's aides back in August. The court's chosen custodian of the union was Herbert Brewer, chairman of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire branch of Mrs Thatcher's favourite business pressure group, the Institute of Directors, and a former Conservative party official!

Brewer rushed off to Luxemburg, where the bulk of the union's money had been traced, and tried to repatriate the NUM's funds. While knocking on the door of the bank where the money was



deposited, he even declared: 'I am the NUM!' — something no elected official of the union had ever done.

It was an extraordinary situation. The union was under orders not to call the strike official, not to spend money on supporting its members and not to do anything to counter the Coal Board's back-to-work pressure. In addition, the NUM were told they had to 'purge their contempt' before they could recover their funds. And that meant abandoning the strike!

Scargill spelt out what was at stake. The Receiver's appointment, he said, posed 'the most fundamental threat to every trade union in the country' and put at 'immediate risk the very existence of the NUM.'<sup>23</sup>

There were dangerous signs of weakening resolve when the NUM executive met in emergency session on Sunday 2 December. The meeting agreed by 11 votes to 6, with the Yorkshire Area abstaining, to cooperate with the Receiver by bringing the union's funds back to Britain. Fortunately this was overturned at an emergency delegate conference of the union the next day. Jack Collins from Kent knew how shocked the militants were by the executive's decision and what a disaster it would be to bring the money back: 'The executive misread the mood . . . We have to send a clear message to the lads on the picket lines that there is no compromise, no surrender.'

The delegates called on the TUC now to organise industrial action in support of the miners and after the conference, Arthur Scargill appealed once more for solidarity:

The trade union movement has a choice. It can either be in contempt of the law or in contempt of its members. If it ever loses the support of its members and they hold it in contempt then the trade union movement is lost. This most serious threat by the High Court to smash the NUM is but a prelude to the smashing of the entire trade union and Labour movement. I only hope that trade unionists recognise that they must stand up and fight.

But the call fell on deaf ears. No sooner had the NUM asked for industrial action than the TUC replied that it was out of the question, as was any action in support of the NUM that might leave the TUC itself liable for contempt proceedings. That meant they would offer the NUM neither funds, buildings or even a phone to operate from if the Receiver took over their Sheffield headquarters!

It was the most abject surrender by the TUC leaders. But they went further. Not content with washing their hands of the miners in their hour of greatest need, they insisted they'd worked their fingers



to the bone trying to drum up solidarity. According to the **Financial Times**, Arthur Scargill was told: 'Union leaders had made genuine and sustained attempts to drum up industrial support and that their failure was not due to lack of will or lack of effort.'<sup>24</sup>

For the rest of December, Kinnock and Norman Willis limited themselves to begging the government to return to talks. But the lower Kinnock and Willis stooped, the more the Tories put the boot into the miners. Each time they sued for peace instead of campaigning for solidarity, the rhetoric from Tory ministers got stronger.

As Christmas approached, miners' supporters from every town and city flooded into the coalfields, bringing with them hundreds of thousands of pounds to give the miners a decent Christmas. They laid on kids' parties, turkeys, food parcels, presents. It was one of the most overwhelming displays of support ever seen in an industrial dispute.

It put new heart into many mining communities. Their very real nightmares of a cold, hungry and isolated Christmas were swept aside by the tidal wave of gifts and solidarity. Many mining families talked about this Christmas on strike as their best ever.

The contrast between this tribute to the courage of the miners and their families and the words of the official leaders of the trade union and labour movement had never been starker.



Christmas picketing at Rossington